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The Second Sex (1949)
By
Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)

The awareness of being the other in becoming

“A person is not born a woman, but becomes one” (SS Vol. II, ch. I)

Introduction

- The issue : the relation between Man & Woman
- The author: Simone De Beauvoir (1908-1986)
 - A woman: “if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say I’m a woman” (p.1)
“...best qualified to elucidate the situation of women” (p.9)
 - A committed writer: “whose whole existence is commanded by writing to reveal the meaning of being in the world.” (her own diary)
 - A student of philosophy: influenced by Bergson (choice and freedom) and by Hegel “(*To be is to have become*)” and existentialist, the problems that have appealed to me “... the theme is almost always this opposition of self and other” (diary)
- The problem: “*Woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality*” (p5).
- The Second Sex: A genuine search and analysis of woman’s identity in relation to the other,” *aspiring to full membership in the human race.*” (p10)

A. The Second Sex (1949) timely and pertinent:

- 1945: The end of WWI&II → reconstruct a more just social order: “*what is certain, she says, is that so far the possibilities of women have been lost for humanity and it is high time in her interest and in the interest of all to give her chances*”(diary).
- 1948: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights → All men born free and equal regardless of sex
- Liberation movements and decolonization:
- “A person is not born a woman, but becomes one” (SS Vol. II, ch. I).
- “...*submission as her true vocation*” (p.13).
- “*Women have always been subordinated to men, and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical event or a social change- it was not something that occurred*” (p.4).
- “The principle of the **Eternal Feminine**”, “*quite evidently this problem would be without significance if we were to believe that woman’s destiny is inevitably determined by physiological, psychological, or economic forces.*” (p.10) She refuses to confine women to her biological female functions and the duties that are attached to these roles.

B. What is a woman?

- Aristotle / Plato / The Jew / Bossuet / St Thomas Aquinas / Benda
- “*Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subjugation of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth*” (p6).

C. Otherness:

- *“The category of the other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality- that of the Self and the Other...”*
- *Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought” (p3).*
- CVSP 204: for **Freud**, the Other is one part of the three-headed monster that stands in the way to our happiness. **Edward Said** studies the relation between West and East, as the One and the other, in view of a richer, fuller humanity.
- *“in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness; the subject can be posed only in being opposed-he (the man) sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object”(p3).*
- *“There is an absolute human type, the masculine, whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (p2).*

D. Reciprocal necessity failed:

- Man’s sexual dependency → *to be feminine, a desirable woman, she must become an object.*
- Work as a means of emancipation → *the women as dangerous competitor → accustomed to work for lower wages” (p. 7).*

E. “Why is it that women do not dispute man’s sovereignty?”

- Women do not say “we”.
- *Accepted this image of themselves and they comply with it.*
- *Complicity with the oppressor*
- *They lack the means of organizing themselves*
- *They have no solidarity*
- *They are often pleased with their role as Other (p.4)*



F. How can a human being (in woman’s situation) attain fulfillment?

→ **EXISTENTIALISM:**

- Existence is an ongoing open process made of a series of successive choices, leading the self to where it wants to be.
- We are the sum total of our acts / choices.
- The awareness and the consciousness of being are our responsibility.
- *The need to engage in freely chosen projects” (p10).*
- Fulfillment is to act, that is to choose, and to choose in freedom.

G. The feminist struggle has started

- *“Confined in immanence endeavors to hold man in that prison, so that woman will no longer suffer from being confined there: mother and wife. All oppression creates a state of war. Regarded as inessential she cannot fail to demand the re-establishment of her sovereignty” (p12).*
- *‘Today ,writes De Beauvoir, the combat takes a different shape: instead of wishing to put man in prison, woman endeavors to escape from prison ; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence, but to emerge, herself into the light of transcendence”(p12).*
- *“She declares herself his equal” (p12) → He refuses to accept this comparison*

- *Between the two adversaries confronting each other in their pure liberty, an agreement could be easily reached, **the more so as the war profits neither***” (p13).

H. De Beauvoir foresees a wide spectrum of a new kind of relations that recognizes and values the Otherness and welcomes the differences in reciprocity.

Elements for a solution:

- Disregard quarrelling: *“when quarrelling one no longer reasons well”* (p9).
- Impartiality: *“Many of today’s women can afford the luxury of impartiality”* (p9).
- Clarity and understanding → opportunities and the obstacles
- Commitment to the general interest & the public good
- Importance of Education: *“since woman is a product elaborated by civilization”*
- Empowering women: *“Let them be provided with living of their own...dependence will be abolished”* (p16).
- Necessary changes in economic, moral, social , & cultural conditions

I. Envisaged solution: New relations of flesh and sentiments based on reciprocity

- *“**Both** should assume the ambiguity of existence made body with a clear-sighted modesty, combined with an authentic pride, they would see each other as equals and would live out their **erotic drama in amity** (in friendliness)”* (p18).
- *“...fact that **we are human beings**, and that, this fact is more **important than all the peculiarities** that distinguish human beings from one another. ...In both sexes is played out the same drama of the flesh and the spirit of finitude and transcendence; both are moved away by time and laid in wait for by death, they have the same essential need for one another, and they can gain from their liberty the same glory. If they were to taste it, they would no longer be tempted to dispute fallacious privileges, and **fraternity between them could then come into existence**”* (p18).
- *“**New relations of flesh and sentiments** of which we have no conception will arise between the sexes, already indeed, there have appeared between men and women friendships, rivalries, complicities, comradeships- chaste and sensual- which past centuries could not have conceived”* (p.19).

Feminism

Different Approaches to Feminism

The doctrine and the struggle for women’s social and political rights equal to those of men.

Marxist Feminism
Liberal Feminism
Radical Feminism
Analytic Feminism
Socialist Feminism
Existentialist Feminism
Post-Modern Feminism
Islamic Feminism

The UN Efforts:



- **CEDAW**: Convention on the **E**limination of All Forms of **D**iscrimination **A**gainst **W**omen (1979); **4 World conferences**: 1st Mexico City (1975)/2nd Copenhagen (1980)/3rd Nairobi (1985)/4th Beijing (1995)

Women in the Arab World

Found in every sphere of public life / Few names of women from the Middle East: Laure Moghaizel, Nawal Saadawi, Hanan Ashrawi (you can search for yourself for other names).

Yet, a lot remains to be done!

Namely for the improvement of the living conditions of ordinary women; in the field of **literacy**...., **crimes of honor**, **repudiation** and **divorce**, **prostitution**, and most tragic of all the inhuman practice of **excision** which is the mutilation of the girl's genital organ, in addition to **poverty** and **violence** which is increasing in this part of the world and weighing heavily on both women and men.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW 1979)

&

Fourth World Conference on Women

Beijing, China - September 1995

Action for Equality, Development and Peace

- Action to end discrimination
- Ensure women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in:
 - Political and public life including the right to vote & to stand for election
 - Education
 - Health
 - Employment.
- Reproductive rights of women

What is happiness for a woman?

Mernissi's Opinion

"Happiness, she would explain, was when a person felt good, light, creative, content, loving, and loved, and free. An unhappy person felt as if there were barriers crushing her desires and the talents she had inside. A happy woman was one who could exercise all kinds of rights, from the right to move to the right to create, compete, and challenge, and at the same time could feel loved for doing so. Part of happiness was to be loved by a man who enjoyed your strength and was proud of your talents. Happiness was also about the right to privacy, the right to retreat from the company of others and plunge into contemplative solitude. Or to sit by yourself doing nothing for a whole day, and not give excuses or feel guilty about it either. Happiness was to be with loved ones, and yet still feel that you existed as a separate being, that you were not there just to make them happy. Happiness was when there was a balance between what you gave and what you took. I then asked her how much happiness she has in her life, just to get an idea, and she said that it varied according to the days. Some days she had only five percent; others, like evenings spent with Father on the terrace, she had full blown one hundred percent happiness."

From: Mernissi, Fatima: The Harem Within, Tales of a Moroccan Girlhood, Bantam Book, 1995. (p.84)